

Teachers College, Columbia University, Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics, 2008, Vol. 8, No. 2
The Forum

“Could You, Perhaps, Pretty Please?”: Request Directness in Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization

Heather Tatton

Teachers College, Columbia University

I am grateful to Professor Beebe for introducing me to the field of discourse analysis. Since that first introductory class, I have continued to be intrigued by the many facets of discourse studies. I was so affected that in subsequent courses, if the option was available, I chose to focus my assigned research on an area related to discourse, including studies in pragmatics and conversation analysis. In addition, I have internalized much of what I learned from Professor Beebe and have a tendency to apply it to everyday conversations (sometimes to the dismay of my friends and family members). The article below is an excerpt from the first paper that I submitted to Professor Beebe. I remember it fondly and will always be thankful for her assistance and influence.

In 1967, Erving Goffman proposed the idea of *face*, a term used to describe the perception of self. Face can be lost, maintained, or enhanced during interactions with others (Goffman, 2006). In 1987, Brown and Levinson followed up on this idea by defining the notion of politeness in terms of positive and negative face, with positive face being our optimistic self-image and desire to be viewed positively by others, and negative face being our desire to act without imposition. They continued by defining *face threatening acts*, utterances which challenge either a person's positive face (with disapproval or contempt) or negative face (through a request for action which impinges upon a person's freedom from imposition) (Brown & Levinson, 2006). In this literature review, negative face and freedom from imposition are key issues, and I will review studies which describe differences among cultures in terms of making requests and their ensuing degrees of imposition.

Because the choice of requestive strategies directly effects how face-threatening the speech act will be, making a request is an especially delicate proposition. Consider the differences between the following: (a) “Close the window,” (b) “Close the window, please,” (c) “Could you please close the window?” (d) “Could you close the window? I can't reach it,” and (e) “Burr, it's cold in here!” These five requests show diverse strategies for approaching a face-threatening act, different degrees of politeness, and thus varying kinds of corresponding indirectness (or, in the first example, directness). Many times, the choice of strategies is influenced by sociocultural norms such as status, gender, social distance, power, and/or environment/situation. In some cultures, more importance is placed on a person's status, age, or social distance than in others. Therefore, the degree of directness used in a request may differ based on these sociocultural standards.

Before embarking on a discussion of request strategies, it is helpful to review background and terminology. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), which began in 1984, is a significant collaborative effort among linguists that aims to empirically study the speech acts of requests and apologies. The focus of the project is to study speech acts in terms of intracultural/situational variation, cross-cultural variation, and individual variation (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Studies performed in coordination with the CCSARP have been typically completed through the use of a discourse completion test (DCT), or, a written questionnaire that incorporates varying degrees of social distance and dominance. In addition to designing the DCT, the CCSARP developed a coding scheme in order to standardize the terminology used across the research.

As defined by the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), requests consist of three parts: (a) the *alerter* or *address term*, (b) the *head act*, and (c) the *adjunct to the head act* (also known as *supportive moves*). Alerters can be anything from “Hey you...” to “Pardon me...” and are used simply to get the attention of the hearer. The head act, on the other hand, is the core of the request and where the performance of the speech act actually takes place. Within the head act, three different strategies have been observed: direct (or impositive), conventionally indirect, and nonconventionally indirect. In the studies reviewed (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Cenoz & Valencia, 1996; Eslamirasekh, 1993; Suh, 1999), the cross-cultural variance was greatest in terms of directness. A direct request is likely to contain an imperative and would be something like “Close the window.” In contrast, one way to minimize the imposition of a request is by using an indirect strategy (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). An example of a conventionally indirect strategy is the use of a modal, as in “*Could* you open the window?” A nonconventionally indirect strategy uses the least amount of imposition and takes the form of a hint, as in “Burr, it’s cold in here.”

In the studies examined (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Cenoz & Valencia, 1996; Eslamirasekh, 1993; Suh, 1999), it appears that native English speakers (NS) prefer conventionally indirect strategies (“Would you...”; “Could you...”). In one study, over 85% of the NS responses were conventionally indirect (Cenoz & Valencia, 1996). In another, NS 78% of responses were conventionally indirect (Eslamirasekh, 1993). Impositives were rarely used by NS (less than 13% in all studies reviewed) and nonconventionally indirect strategies were even less frequent. NNS, on the other hand, used impositives to a much greater degree. Based on the collection of articles reviewed, the overwhelming difference in strategy between NS and NNS was the use of impositives—NNS were decidedly more direct than NS. Because directness and politeness go hand-in-hand, this difference can be a source of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Upon further examination of these studies (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Cenoz & Valencia, 1996; Eslamirasekh, 1993; Suh, 1999), it is clear that sociocultural factors might play a role in the use of impositives. In some cultures, the closer and less formal the relationship, the more impositives appear to be used. For example, Eslamirasekh (1993) posited that Persian society is less individualistic and more psychologically dependant on group mentality, which leads to strategies of positive politeness as opposed to negative politeness as defined by Brown and Levinson (2006). Positive politeness asserts an assumption of compliance whereas negative politeness shows deference to the hearer by allowing the option of noncompliance. In fact, in Eslamirasekh’s study, Persian speakers were found to use direct strategies 70% of the time while North American native speakers used impositives in only 12% of the tested cases. Thus, in a society that stresses group solidarity, directness and assumption of compliance may be the norm.

One possible concern about these studies is that all of the above-mentioned data were gathered through the use of the DCT. We might question whether we can assume that the responses are reflective of what would occur in natural discourse. When faced with a written scenario, are we more likely to aspire toward politeness (using an indirect strategy), than we would in an actual situation? Answering questions in writing (as in a DCT) gives the respondents time to think, reflect, and possibly select what they perceive should be an appropriate answer, as opposed to what may be a more naturalistic response. Further research in this area using recordings of natural day-to-day conversations may help in resolving these questions. Of course, collecting naturally occurring data is difficult and time consuming—one reason the DCT has been used thus far. Nevertheless, until we gather recordings of requests performed in real-life situations, we will never know if the data we currently have is reflective of reality and worthy of our analysis.

Because we know that requests pose a pragmatic challenge to some non-native speakers, the next logical question concerns pedagogical implications. In a recent study by Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005), students were implicitly taught the pragmatics of requests, apologies, suggestions, and refusals through the use of a video consisting of twenty scenarios. Students were asked to judge the appropriateness of the speech act as well as make repairs to the dialogs. The repairs made by the learners showed they were often able to identify the source of pragmatic breakdowns; however, their chosen improvements were not always target-like. In essence, they knew what to change, but exactly how to change it was more of a challenge. Nevertheless, according to the authors, progress was made by the students. Given that their study focused on the implicit teaching of speech acts, it could be surmised that explicit teaching might yield better results. There are numerous approaches to teaching pragmatics, including the use of both implicit and explicit methods. In fact, a discussion of pedagogical methods merits a separate paper. However, before evaluating appropriate methods of instruction, it is essential that real data be gathered in order to develop relevant instructional materials. Bardovi-Harlig (1996) notes:

Although it may be possible to introspect on one's own grammatical competence, it is not possible to do the same for language use. The bottom line is that we need to observe language use to provide reasonably authentic—and representative—models of language use. (p. 27)

In the end, this brings us back to the concept of collecting contextual, real-life data from which both research and pedagogy can benefit.

In the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (CCP) there are countless nuances to pursue and gain appreciation for. Professor Beebe's well-established interest in CCP has inspired my continuing curiosity in discourse analysis. I'll always be grateful for her support and guidance.

REFERENCES

- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1996). Pragmatics and language teaching: Bringing pragmatics and pedagogy together. In L. Bouton (Ed.), *Pragmatics and language learning*, 7 (pp. 21-39). Urbana-Champaign, IL: Division of English as an International Language.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Griffin, R. (2005). L2 pragmatic awareness: Evidence from the ESL classroom. *System*, 33, 401-415.
- Blum-Kulka, S., & House, J. (1989). Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 123-154). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns CCSARP. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 196-213.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (2006). Politeness: Some universals in language usage. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (pp. 311-323). New York: Routledge. (Original work published 1987.)
- Cenoz, J., & Valencia, J. (1996). Cross-cultural communication and interlanguage pragmatics: American vs. European requests. In L. Bouton (Ed.), *Pragmatics and language learning* 7 (pp. 47-53). Urbana-Champaign, IL: Division of English as an International Language.

- Eslamirasekh, Z. (1993). A cross-cultural comparison of the requestive speech act realization patterns in Persian and American English. In L. Bouton & Y. Kachru (Eds.), *Pragmatics and language learning*, 4 (pp. 85-103). Urbana-Champaign, IL: Division of English as an International Language.
- Goffman, E. (2006). On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. In A. Jaworski & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (pp. 299-310). New York: Routledge. (Original work published 1967.)
- Suh, J. S. (1999). Pragmatic perception of politeness in requests by Korean learners of English as a second language. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37, 195-213.

Heather Tatton completed an M.A. in TESOL at Teachers College, Columbia University and is in the process of completing an Ed.M. in Applied Linguistics at the same institution. Her research interests include interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic pedagogy in the ESL classroom, and classroom discourse. She is currently teaching computer literacy for ESL students at an adult charter school in Washington, DC. Her previous experience includes teaching business English at a NYC accounting firm, EFL in Ecuador, and ESL at the Community English Program at Teachers College.